**Grace and Gratitude.** Sunday January 31st 2021 Psalm 111

Quite a few years ago I was talking to a friend who was a sports teacher. He had procured a significant amount of sports equipment to give to children to encourage them to pursue community sport. The children had been quite excited, but he commented to me that we need to focus more on teaching children about gratitude. Just a few years later I saw that stationery outlets were beginning to sell gratitude journals, the conversation with my friend immediately sprang to mind. Last year gratitude journals really became very popular. As the whole world sought to cope with anxiety and isolation, simple acts of kindness and care became far more significant, and expressing gratitude through journals, social media, phone calls and other ways became helpful.

If you have been using “With love to the world” you may have noticed an interesting quote from Karl Barth regarding gratitude he said **“Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

We gather together in worship as recipients of the grace of God and we gather to express our gratitude and praise to God for the grace we have experienced.

The grace we have experienced is depicted beautifully through the psalm we have just heard. This psalm describes the character and actions of God. It is a very personal Psalm written in the first person and written passionately. Yet it is brought to the congregation. It says, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our worship of God should indeed be deeply personal and it will be expressed in private but we are also called to bring our personal worship of God together with others, for God calls us to be God’s people not just individuals following God.

The worship of one person can inspire others in connecting and reconnecting with God. It is expressed well in the lines of the hymn “All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by His grace, and bids us, each to each restored, together seek His face. He bids us build each other up; and gathered into one, to our high calling’s glorious hope we hand in hand go on.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The worship of the soloist expressing this Psalm would have inspired the ancient worshippers of God. When I was at College a new component was added to our Worship Services it was titled a Living Epistle. It was a time when a nominated person would share something about God’s faithfulness to them in their own faith journey. (In other traditions it would probably be called a testimony). It was frequently the highlight of our gathering. This psalm is a little similar though it tends to recall shared experiences of the goodness of God to the people of God.

Sharing aspects of our faith journey together provides encouragement to one another and enables each of us to grow. It would be good to include some opportunities to do more of this in our times of worship, and we have a particular opportunity to participate in this through our forthcoming Lenten Studies.

This psalm focuses on the character and actions of God. God’s actions flow naturally from God’s character.

This psalm has a myriad ways of describing God’s character: righteous, gracious, merciful, just, faithful, trustworthy, awesome, covenant keeping, provider, redeemer. Taking some time to explore each of these terms would be a very valuable exercise. For example the term merciful “comes from a term suggesting the womb-love of a mother who has given birth to the children of Israel”.[[4]](#footnote-4) These types of images can give us a richer understanding of the character of God.

These character traits are displayed to us by God’s actions, God’s involvement in our world. This psalm goes on to highlight that God’s actions and by inference his character traits deserve to be studied. “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

One of the ways in which we worship God is through exercising our minds to grow in our understanding of God. I recall in the early days of my theological study just stopping at times and reflecting on how amazing it was that I was having this opportunity to study concepts that were so personally enriching and that simultaneously enabled my love for God to grow. Our reading of Scripture, our reading of other Christian literature, our research on a particular theme can all be great avenues through which we can worship God.

Australians are not renowned for dramatic expressions of emotion, except perhaps in some sporting arenas. This Psalm features strong, vibrant emotion and is intensely personal in its style. When it speaks of worshipping God with “my whole heart”, this would be seen as the seat of the mind and will, so this phrase would mean bringing the totality of who you are, to the process of worshipping God. It speaks of delighting in God’s works, allowing ourselves to be dazzled by what God has done. Our times of worship are times of celebration. I wonder in what ways we may be able to encourage one another to bring the totality of who we are to our worship of God, to provide great opportunities to celebrate, to delight in who God is and what God has done.

Recalling the grace of God towards us certainly sparks gratitude and praise, but it also inspires other active responses, regarding how we live and what we say. Psalm 112 is strongly linked to this psalm and it explores this more fully. It picks up many of the characteristics of God and declares these to also be the characteristics of the followers of God, traits such as mercy, righteousness, faithfulness, justice, trustworthiness, graciousness and generosity. As people made in the image of God this makes sense, but of course it is also deeply challenging. How much are we resembling the God we worship?

We began this reflection considering Barth’s statement about the intrinsic link between Grace and Gratitude, and it strikes me as a good place to return to as we conclude. I thought I’d share a story of a way in which I experienced the grace of God this week and acknowledging my gratitude for God’s goodness in that.

During the week I was called to see an elderly person, unknown to our congregation, a lady whose life was rapidly ebbing away. She had voiced a request to see a minister to her carers but they found it difficult to locate a minister, I’m not sure how long they had been looking but by the time they contacted me she really wasn’t able to communicate effectively. Though I was aware of a variety of things I could say to her, ways in which I could pray for her, scripture that I could share with her I also felt disappointed for her that I couldn’t be sure of what may be most helpful for her personally. I looked around her room as she dozed and noticed a Christmas card, I thought it may give me some clues regarding her or her family. I was quite stunned to discover that the card was sent by a friend of mine, who I was able to ring and from whom I was able to learn about this dear lady. So I was able to share with her in ways that I felt would be particularly relevant and helpful and I was also able to pass on my friend’s love and thoughts. So I experienced the amazing grace of God in providing a pathway for me to communicate more effectively with this follower of God. I think for me and for us it reminds us of God’s faithfulness to us even when life itself may be ebbing away. Praise God.

1. Karl Barth, 2004. Church Dogmatics, Vol. 4.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation,* ed. G. W. Bromley and T. F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 111:1 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Together in Song 442 vs 1, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brueggemann, Walter and Bellinger, William, H. Jnr, *Psalms,* (New York: Cambridge university Press, 2014) 483 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Psalm 111:2 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)